



CULTIVATING EMPLOYMENT-ORIENTED INTERDISCIPLINARY HIGH-QUALITY FOREIGN LANGUAGE TALENTS IN CHINESE UNIVERSITIES: PATHWAYS AND OUTCOMES IN THE AI ERA

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Abstract:

Based on survey and interview data with 56 HR managers, business supervisors, deans of foreign language schools, discipline leaders, class advisors, and counselors, as well as 317 graduates from foreign language majors across 10 universities engaged in dual-degree or micro-specialization reforms, together with responses from 6 large enterprises in China, this study offers an updated picture of talent needs and educational outcomes. The findings reveal that employers now limit their recruitment to graduates with a single foreign language degree. Instead, there is a strong demand for graduates with an interdisciplinary profile— “Foreign Language + AI Applications/Computer Science/Cross-border E-commerce/International Trade/Area Studies/International Relations.” Such graduates not only receive significantly more job offers but also enjoy a starting salary that is typically 30–50% higher than their single-major counterparts. Similarly, students who obtained a dual degree or a micro-specialization besides their foreign language major reported substantially better employment rates, higher job quality, and a greater likelihood of pursuing postgraduate study. Employment outcomes show a clear hierarchy: interdisciplinary dual degree > foreign language + micro-specialization > single foreign language major, with salary gaps at each level exceeding 20–30%. However, due to factors such as training philosophy and a lack of interdisciplinary faculty, the number of universities that have begun to reform and offer interdisciplinary dual degree and micro speciality teaching in foreign language majors is limited. It is recommended that universities increase investment in interdisciplinary faculty, strengthen the offering of "foreign language + interdisciplinary" dual degree courses, and actively explore undergraduate and graduate programs that fit the needs of enterprises, such as "foreign language + interdisciplinary triple degree" or "foreign language + interdisciplinary dual degree + interdisciplinary micro-specialization tracks".

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1. Introduction

In recent years, foreign language majors in Chinese universities, most notably English, have been increasingly labeled as “warning” disciplines, often associated with high risks of unemployment. The reasons are not difficult to trace: curricula remain overly uniform, textbook content is outdated and strikingly similar across institutions, and as a result, graduates leave with a narrow knowledge base, weak critical thinking, and insufficient competitiveness in the job market (Xu, 2025; Wang, 2024). Some science and technology universities have already reduced, or even suspended, their foreign language enrollments. The crux of the problem lies in a persistent misalignment between educational programs and market demands. Traditional English majors are characterized by vague goals, a lack of distinctive positioning, and minimal differentiation, leaving graduates uncompetitive in the labor market. Teacher education in English has also been shrinking, largely due to restrictions on after-school training, reduced English instruction in schools, and the demographic decline that has cut demand for language teachers. Business English graduates, though positioned for industry, often fall short in both advanced language application and international business competence. Translation majors (in both interpreting and translation) tend to lack a background in international politics, STEM disciplines, and technical English, while the rapid advances of AI translation tools, most visibly the widespread adoption of ChatGPT, have already replaced many entry-level translation jobs. Thus, AI has introduced not only opportunities but also disruptive challenges, intensifying the difficulties faced by foreign language programs in student recruitment and graduate employment (Jia & Wang, 2025; Hu, 2024).

Meanwhile, as the Belt and Road Initiative deepens international cooperation, Chinese enterprises of various scales are actively expanding into global markets, creating an urgent demand for interdisciplinary “foreign language plus” talent. Yet a striking mismatch persists: graduates of programs such as international trade or e-commerce often lack adequate language proficiency, while English majors, conversely, have little knowledge of international business. Neither group alone fully satisfies employers’ needs (Deng, 2024). In 2025, the number of university graduates in China will reach 12.22 million, the highest in history. On one side, enterprises struggle to recruit graduates with strong “foreign language plus” competencies even at high salaries; on the other, many English majors, after four years of undergraduate study and sometimes an additional two or three years of graduate education, find it difficult to secure a relevant job. The traditional pathways of talent cultivation in foreign language education, therefore, require urgent reform (Li, 2025). Responding to this pressure, some universities have already undertaken major transformations in program design, training models, disciplinary orientation, and curriculum structure (Lin, 2025).

In this context, the research group planned to conduct an in-depth and systematic investigation into the educational and teaching reforms of foreign language disciplines and majors in mainstream universities in China, focusing on the employment-oriented composite talent training model and its effectiveness in the AI era. The study would explore the training programs, teaching reform achievements, and their impact on the employment ability of graduates in different universities. By summarizing successful cases and analyzing problems, this paper proposes specific and feasible reform paths to provide a reference for the reform of foreign language disciplines in other universities. This is the purpose and significance of this research.

2. Related Research Trends and Review

In recent years, research on the reform of foreign language education in Chinese universities has become highly visible. Broadly speaking, four main directions can be observed.

2.1 Restructuring of Majors

Some universities have attempted to reshape the traditional English major into “English plus” programs in response to dramatic changes in social demand and the pressure of graduate employment. Examples include English (International Relations), English (Language Intelligence), and Translation (International Communication). Such initiatives are not merely cosmetic; they involve substantial reforms of curricula, teaching staff, and the alignment of industry, academia, and research. The goal is to create a mechanism of collaborative training that integrates education with practice, thereby producing “English+” graduates who are both application-oriented and globally competent. However, so far only a limited number of institutions, such as Zhejiang International Studies University, Zhejiang Gongshang University, and Northeast Normal University, have embarked on this ambitious exploration (Sun, 2025; Wu, 2024; Cui, 2024). These reforms have introduced fresh perspectives on how to reimagine foreign language disciplines, but at the same time, they impose higher demands on faculty capacity and curriculum resources.

2.2 Implementation of Dual-degree and Micro-specialization Programs

Within the broader framework of the “New Liberal Arts,” several universities, including Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai International Studies University, Southeast University, and Hebei University, have launched dual-degree programs such as Spanish + International Journalism and Communication, German + Economics, English + Information Engineering, English + Law, or English Education + another discipline. In practice, students are required to take around 45 additional credits, or roughly 14–15 courses, beyond the 160 credits of a single foreign language major (Ye, 2023; Zhao, 2023). Since 2022, other institutions like Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Shanghai International Studies University, and Beijing Language and Culture University have

begun micro-specialization modules in areas such as International Economics and Trade, Accounting, International Business Law, International Chinese Education, Global Governance, Translation and International Communication, Area Studies, Social Media and Global Communication, Foreign-related Rule of Law, Data Analytics, Smart Foreign Language Education, and Intercultural Communication. Each module consists of 5–8 courses, totaling 10–16 credits, and students—usually in their sophomore year—are asked to select one such module. After two to four semesters of study, they receive a “micro-specialization certificate.” These courses are typically scheduled during weekends, holidays, or summer terms, so they rarely conflict with the core curriculum (Yan, 2024; Shao, 2024; Qin, 2023).

2.3 Course Reforms Based on ESP and AI

Many universities have also introduced reforms built around micro-lectures, MOOCs, and multimedia (Huang & Xie, 2023). Scholars have called for a shift from general English (EGP) to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (He *et al.*, 2023). Classroom experiments with blended models, such as TBLT combined with SPOCs, have achieved encouraging but still partial results (Shi, 2024). More recently, a growing body of studies has focused on the potential of large language models (LLMs) to empower interdisciplinary foreign language training (Gao, 2025; Huang, 2025; Zou, 2025). Yet most of these reforms remain confined to existing courses. While they can enhance students’ English proficiency, they have not yet succeeded in cultivating interdisciplinary employability in a substantive way. Developing such competence would require the addition of numerous courses across other domains, which in turn raises complex questions of teaching philosophy and curriculum design. The reform, therefore, is likely to be a long and difficult journey (Du, 2025).

2.4 Review and Commentary

The driving force behind all these reform attempts is clear: to enhance graduates’ competitiveness by aligning foreign language education more closely with social and market needs. However, a closer look at the literature reveals that most programs of micro-specialization or “English+” restructuring are still in their infancy. The first classes of students will graduate only in 2025, and thus, empirical studies examining the actual effects on interdisciplinary competence, global employability, and job outcomes remain virtually absent. This project intends to fill this gap by conducting systematic investigations and evaluations of ongoing reforms. By analyzing data from different universities will provide evidence-based assessments of the effectiveness of current initiatives, and propose specific and feasible pathways for further development. Ultimately, the aim is to generate insights that may guide both higher education administrators and institutions in the reform of foreign language disciplines in China.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Objectives

The objectives of this project can be summarized as follows:

- 1) To define and analyze the meaning and standards of “interdisciplinary or compound talents,” with particular attention to how foreign language competence can be integrated with broader cross-disciplinary abilities;
- 2) To investigate and examine ongoing curricular reforms in university foreign language programs in the AI era, with an emphasis on employment-oriented training models;
- 3) To evaluate the effectiveness of these reforms by considering graduates’ global competence, employability, and workplace satisfaction;
- 4) To propose feasible and operational pathways for reform in foreign language disciplines based on empirical findings, so as to provide guidance for institutions that have not yet undertaken large-scale reforms. In addition, the project will align its investigation with enterprise-level demand analysis, paying close attention to how businesses’ expectations of foreign language graduates are shifting—especially in relation to new job profiles emerging under the rapid application of AI technologies. The ultimate goal is to offer reform experiences and practical insights for institutions still hesitant to initiate major transformations.

3.2 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following specific questions:

- 1) What concrete skills do employers expect of foreign language graduates—such as translation competence, business negotiation, intercultural communication, or even creativity—and how satisfied are they with current graduates?
- 2) What are the existing reform models and training pathways for cultivating interdisciplinary, employment-oriented graduates in foreign language programs under the influence of AI?
- 3) How do graduates produced under these models perform in terms of global competence and employability? How do they evaluate their job satisfaction?
- 4) Based on the empirical evidence, what actionable and effective pathways can be suggested for the reform and development of foreign language disciplines?

3.3 Sampling and Data Collection

The fieldwork will be conducted in China’s two fastest-growing economic regions, the Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta. Specifically:

- 1) Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 20–30 HR managers and senior business executives from 5–10 large-scale, internationally oriented enterprises across different industries. The aim is to map in detail their expectations, requirements, and practical concerns regarding internationalized foreign language professionals.

- 2) 30-40 deans, program heads, class advisers, and student counselors from 10 mainstream universities in China with good reforms in foreign language majors were selected, as well as 200-300 graduates in foreign language majors, to conduct online and offline surveys and interviews to understand the training paths, educational reform plans, and employment situations of high-quality composite talents in foreign language majors at these universities.

3.4 Instruments

Two sets of instruments were designed for the study. Revised on Wang Yimei (2024), the research team developed an interview outline of *Employers' Expectations for Foreign Language Graduates under Globalization*. It consists of seven dimensions: (i) institutional background, (ii) globalization processes, (iii) job requirements for foreign language graduates, (iv) salary levels, (v) employer satisfaction, (vi) skill deficiencies among current graduates, and (vii) recruitment practices.

A second set of instruments: *Survey and Interview Outline on the Cultivation of Interdisciplinary Foreign Language Talents* was adapted from the frameworks of Gao Xiaoyu (2024) and Xia Meng (2024). The questionnaire covers 12 dimensions, including reform initiatives, curricular design, teaching models, faculty quality, perceived teaching effectiveness, student acceptance, global competence, employment outcomes, problems encountered, salary satisfaction, and job satisfaction. Altogether, the questionnaire contains 31 items. The corresponding interview protocol follows the same 12 themes to allow deeper exploration. Data collection will thus provide both quantitative and qualitative evidence regarding ongoing reforms and their impact. After pilot testing and expert review, the questionnaire achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85, which ensures a reasonably high level of reliability and validity.

4. Results and Analysis

The research team conducted fieldwork in China's two most economically dynamic regions, the Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta. Six internationalized large enterprises were selected, covering sectors such as telecommunications, mobile phones, new energy vehicles, home appliances, and internet platforms—specifically, Huawei, BYD, Midea, Alibaba, Geely, and Aux. Besides, ten universities implementing interdisciplinary reforms through foreign language double degrees and micro-specializations were included, such as Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai International Studies University, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Zhejiang International Studies University, Zhejiang Gongshang University, Northeast Normal University, Southeast University, and Hebei University. Interviews were conducted with a total of 56 participants, including HR directors, senior business managers, deans of foreign language schools, program heads, class advisors, and student counselors. Moreover, questionnaires and interviews were administered to 317 graduates of foreign language programs. The key findings are summarized below.

4.1 Talent Demand of the Employer

Interviews with 15 HR directors and global business managers from the six large international enterprises revealed several notable patterns. Currently, these companies recruit a few graduates with a single foreign language major. Instead, there is a strong demand for graduates with interdisciplinary “foreign language +” skills, such as foreign language + AI, computer science, cross-border e-commerce, international business, regional studies, or international relations. Starting annual salaries for such graduates are typically ¥150,000–200,000, which is 30–50% higher than for graduates holding only a single foreign language major.

Several senior HR managers explained that, under the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, these enterprises have experienced rapid international business expansion in recent years. Cross-border e-commerce operations and multinational production bases urgently require graduates with integrated “foreign language + interdisciplinary” competencies. Graduates sent to overseas branches can earn doubled annual salaries and enjoy more promotion opportunities, often advancing faster than peers. Yet, graduates meeting these specific hiring criteria are scarce. Consequently, companies frequently have to recruit two to three graduates from different majors to work collaboratively, in order to achieve operational goals. However, such teams are often less efficient than a single graduate possessing a comprehensive interdisciplinary skill set, illustrating a typical case where paying more and hiring more does not necessarily lead to higher productivity.

In 2025, these six companies each recruited 10–20 graduates with double degrees or micro-specialization certificates combining a foreign language and another discipline. The companies reported high satisfaction with these recruits during internships and subsequent employment, particularly noting that double-degree graduates effectively consolidate the competencies of two separate majors. Compared to hiring two graduates from different disciplines, employing one interdisciplinary double-degree graduate reduces coordination needs and significantly improves work efficiency.

Graduates who had only taken optional interdisciplinary micro-specialization courses possessed shallower cross-disciplinary knowledge, and their interdisciplinary abilities were weaker than those of double-degree graduates. Accordingly, companies exhibited a clear preference for offering higher salaries to double-degree graduates. Furthermore, with the ongoing expansion of international operations, enterprises increasingly need graduates equipped with “foreign language + three interdisciplinary degrees” or “foreign language + double degree + micro-specialization” programs, at both undergraduate and master’s levels. Particularly sought after are male graduates willing to work for several years in manufacturing bases in regions such as Africa or Southeast Asia, where living conditions are comparatively challenging.

4.2 Graduate Employment Outcomes

A survey of 317 graduates from ten Chinese universities offering foreign language programs—including 73 graduates with “foreign language + interdisciplinary” double

degrees and 244 graduates who completed minor “foreign language + interdisciplinary micro-specialization” courses, with a gender ratio of approximately 3:7—was conducted alongside randomized focus group interviews covering 20% of the participants.

The results indicate that graduates possessing “foreign language + interdisciplinary” competencies—typically through double degrees in fields such as foreign trade, cross-border e-commerce, computer science, international relations, international economics and trade, accounting, or international business law, or through interdisciplinary micro-specializations—demonstrate significantly higher employment rates, superior job quality, and elevated postgraduate enrollment rates compared to graduates holding only a single foreign language degree. Employment outcomes and starting salaries followed the pattern: interdisciplinary double-degree graduates > foreign language + micro-specialization graduates > single foreign language graduates, with salary differences across these groups ranging from 20–30% at each level.

Interviews revealed that these graduates felt very fortunate to have taken the first batch of experimental courses, such as “foreign language + interdisciplinary double degree or micro-specialization”, and obtained high paying positions in large enterprises upon graduation. However, the employment situation of students in the same school and major who had not pursued these interdisciplinary options was far less optimistic. They also reported that the interdisciplinary dual degree and micro professional elective course programs have very few classes and study enrollment slots, often only offering 1-2 classes and 20-50 study enrollment slots for each interdisciplinary direction, and most students cannot compete for elective quotas. They hope that the school can increase the enrollment slots for interdisciplinary dual degree and micro professional course programs, so that more students can benefit from elective courses.

4.3 Interdisciplinary Double Degree and Micro-Specialization Reforms in Universities

Interviews with 41 participants, including deans of foreign language schools, program directors, class advisers, and student counselors, from the ten surveyed universities revealed several important patterns. Since the launch of the first wave of “foreign language + interdisciplinary” double-degree and micro-specialization reforms, the past one to two years have witnessed a marked improvement in the employment rate, starting salaries, and job quality of participating graduates. The advantage was particularly pronounced for double-degree graduates, whose initial salaries were reported to be nearly twice those of students graduating with a single foreign language degree. Both faculty and students generally expressed strong approval of these programs, and many institutions have begun to take measures to further expand the number of interdisciplinary course offerings. As a result, the proportion of students enrolling in such double-degree or micro-specialization tracks has been steadily increasing. The reason for the limited number of courses offered for interdisciplinary dual degree and micro professional courses is that these interdisciplinary courses often hire teachers from other interdisciplinary majors outside the School of Foreign Languages, which is limited by funding and the tight availability of popular interdisciplinary teaching resources.

Due to the deep-rooted concept of cultivating foreign language talents in traditional English linguistics, English literature, and translation majors in many Chinese universities, it is difficult for foreign language majors to carry out interdisciplinary teaching reforms, especially because of the lack of funds to introduce interdisciplinary teachers. Consequently, out of more than one thousand Chinese institutions offering undergraduate foreign language programs, fewer than one hundred, less than 10%, have introduced double-degree or micro-specialization reforms. Even where such projects have been launched, opportunities remain limited: the number of courses and slots available is limited to accommodate the demand of all interested students. This gap suggests that broader implementation of “foreign language + interdisciplinary” double-degree initiatives, and even more ambitious projects such as “foreign language + triple degree” or “foreign language + double degree + micro-specialization” programs, still require systematic support.

It should also be noted that structural policy constraints play a role. According to the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council (2019), only universities with doctoral-level accreditation in a given discipline are authorized to offer undergraduate double-degree programs. As a result, many ordinary universities remain excluded from this policy framework, and they can only develop interdisciplinary micro-specialization projects as an alternative.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on surveys and interviews with 56 HR managers, business executives, deans of foreign language schools, program directors, class advisers, and counselors from six large enterprises and ten universities implementing interdisciplinary reforms in foreign language programs (dual degrees and micro-majors), as well as with 317 graduates of foreign language majors, several findings emerged. Employers have shown declining interest in hiring graduates with a single foreign language major. By contrast, there is a strong demand for graduates with interdisciplinary expertise, such as “Foreign Languages + AI Applications/Computer Science/Cross-border E-commerce/International Business/Area Studies/International Relations.” These graduates not only receive significantly more job offers but also command starting salaries 30–50% higher than their counterparts with a single foreign language degree. Furthermore, graduates holding dual degrees or micro-majors in foreign language programs exhibit substantially higher employment rates, job quality, and postgraduate admission rates compared to single-major graduates. In terms of employment outcomes and salary levels, the ranking is clear: interdisciplinary dual degrees > foreign languages plus micro-majors > single foreign language majors, with salary gaps between tiers exceeding 20–30%.

However, due to limitations in educational philosophy and the shortage of interdisciplinary faculty, only a small number of universities have initiated dual-degree and micro-major reforms in foreign language education. It is therefore recommended that universities increase investment in interdisciplinary faculty development, expand the

establishment of “Foreign Languages + Interdisciplinary” dual-degree programs, and proactively explore new formats such as “Foreign Languages + Triple Degrees” or “Foreign Languages + Dual Degree + Interdisciplinary Micro-major” at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, so as to better meet labor market demands.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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